

Orwell's Admirers To Strike It Rich

By Karl E. Meyer

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LONDON—A literary event of international importance will shortly occur here with the publication of the collected essays, journalism and letters of George Orwell, whose reputation has risen like a space shot since his death in 1950.

Nearly all of Orwell's nonfiction worth reprinting is gathered in the four fat volumes, weighing 7½ pounds, that Secker and Warburg will publish on Sept. 30. (An American edition will appear later this fall.) About two-thirds of the material has never appeared in book form.

The event should hearten every author who feels unjustly neglected by the unheeding public. During most of his career, Orwell was a square peg: an Old Etonian who turned to socialism, a leftwinger who was prematurely anti-Communist and a critic whose favorite authors included Kipling, Henry Miller, P. D. Wodehouse and Swift (with whom he may yet rank).

Until the appearance of *Animal Farm* in 1945, his success was meager. We learn that in the prime of his career he was offered and accepted an advance of \$84 for a major book of essays, *Inside the Whale*. Three British and a dozen U.S. publishers turned down *Animal Farm* because it might offend Russia—though an American editor declined because "we don't publish animal stories."

When he completed "1984," Orwell wrote his publisher, "It isn't a book I would gamble on for a big sale, but I suppose one could be sure of 10,000 anyway." The novel's title has become part of the language and phrases like "Big Brother is watching you" and "doublethink" are as timely as the slogans chalked on the walls of Prague.

ORWELL'S REAL NAME was Eric Blair, and he was born in Bengal, India, the son of a British civil servant. After attending Eton on a scholarship, he joined the Imperial Police in Burma, for reasons that are still obscure. Five years later he returned to England with a detestation of empire, a distrust of all power, and a sense of fraternity with the poor.

This was the outlook that shaped his prose as he began writing in the 1930s. He chose as his pen name George Orwell. After seriously considering—one is alarmed to read—"H. Lewis Allways," "Kenneth Miles" and "P. S. Burton" (the last being "a name I always use when tramping").

The four volumes contain hundreds of such trifles, none of which appreciably alter the picture of Orwell as a very English dissenter. Orwell was abnormally reticent, and in his will asked that no biography should be written of him. His widow Sonia, who is co-editor of the collected works, says

that only one letter to each of his wives still survives.

Thus the books will be of less interest to the psychoanalyst than to the literary critic, especially, to use a phrase Orwell jotted in a notebook, to "the big cannibal critics that lurk in the deeper waters of American quarterly reviews."

For example, it is now possible to trace with more accuracy the genesis of his nightmarish utopia set in 1984. The idea was in his mind in 1944, when he wrote Gleb Stuve, a Russian literary critic, for more information about Eugene Zamyatin's *We*, a novel about a horrific future written in Russian in 1923.

"I am interested in that kind of book," Orwell comments, "and even keep making notes for one myself that may get written sooner or later."

THE NEW VOLUMES offer a rich if gloomy quarry marked by a vein of deep pessimism, which is more apparent in his letters and diaries than in his published writings. During the blitz in 1940, he noted in his diary: "I have known since about 1931 (Stephen Spender says that he has known since 1929) that the future must be catastrophic. I could not exactly say what wars and revolutions would happen, but they never surprised me when they came."

Yet again and again in these pages Orwell's pessimism is tempered by common sense and by a gleam of self-deflating humor. His various moods were reflected in entries found in a notebook written just before his death:

"Recently I was reading somewhere or other about an Italian curio dealer who attempted to sell a 17th century crucifix to J. P. Morgan . . . it turned out that the real point was that the crucifix took to pieces and inside it was concealed a stiletto. What a perfect symbol of the Christian religion."

"Gross unfairness and misleadingness of much criticism of both U.S.A. and U.S.S.R., because of failure to allow for the size of those countries. Obviously absurdity of comparing a small homogenous population, e.g., Britain, packed together in a small area, with a multi-racial state sprawling across a whole continent . . . People in Britain very high-minded about American treatment of Negroes, but of conditions in South Africa . . . We profit indirectly from what happens in S. Africa, in Jamaica, in Malaya, etc., but these places are separated from us by water. On this last the essential hypocrisy of the British labor movement is based."

"At 50, everyone has the face he deserves."

That was the last entry. On Jan. 21, 1950, Orwell died of pulmonary tuberculosis. He would have been only 65 if he were alive today.